



Power & Politics

PRABHU CHAWLA

FOR A long time now, Pranab Mukherjee has been the Congress-led UPA government's Miracle Man. He is many parts rolled into one: the main troubleshooter, a great unifier and the man to get the most improbable job done. "The man for all seasons and all reasons," they called him. But even miracle men are human and prone to errors. On Budget Day, he made a misstep whose effects are likely to be felt on our politics for a long time.

His decision to hike Customs and excise duties and remove the existing concessions on petrol has created history for more than one reason: for the first time ever, the entire Opposition walked out of the Lok Sabha during the Budget presentation. We also saw something we haven't seen in a long time — MPs from the CPM, BJP, RJD, SP, JD(U) and many smaller parties grouping together outside Parliament, hands linked and pledging to fight the government collectively.

Perhaps, Pranab and the Prime Minister didn't bargain for the backlash when they went through the formality of approving the Budget proposals in a 15-minute cabinet meeting on Friday morning. It wasn't that the Budget was a letdown. The prime minister has congratulated Pranab for a "job well done" which he feels would take the country back to the 9 per cent growth trajectory. Even sections of the Opposition were seen thumping desks when Pranab rolled out a series of measures for the social, agriculture and infrastructure sectors. But in the end, petrol's inflammable properties spoil the party. It is quite likely that faced with the backlash from the united Opposition and even a section of the ruling coalition, the petroleum cess will be rolled back. But the damage has already been done. The UPA which is still a minority government in power with outside support of the BSP, SP, RJD and some smaller parties will be alarmed as some of them begin to find better options across the aisle.

If anything, this Budget reflects the crises and the lack of political consensus within the UPA. With Sonia opting to stay out of the government, there is no tall leader who can iron out the differences within the coalition. Though Madam is the chairperson of the UPA, there has been no formal meeting of the coalition convened in a long time. The Telangana fiasco best sums up the collapse of the consultation process in the coalition when each coalition partner talked a different language. Of course young Rahul Gandhi offers hope but he is busy—and rightly so—creating a Congress party for the future and has left it to the current establishment to handle its own affairs.

The Prime Minister ought to be commended for giving full autonomy to most of his minis-

ters to deal with their departments as they deem fit. But some ministers, particularly those handling fertilisers and telecom portfolios have milked this autonomy to deviate from acceptable norms and policies. When the Centre tried to rein them in, it couldn't, because the ministers rushed to Chennai to complain to M. Karunanidhi.

With the Prime Minister's mind focused on economic diplomacy and forging strategic international alliances, the UPA's internal political management leaves a lot to be desired. The Opposition seems set to take full advantage of the disarray. The new found political unity is not the outcome of a preplanned strategy.

The decision to walk out of the Lok Sabha was taken on the spot by the BJP leaders; the others found common cause and joined.

The Congress's problems will only mount with the political authority of Pranab, its tallest leader, taking a beating. So far, his cross-party friendships and acceptance ensured that the government was able to take allies along and take its legislative agenda forward. Till recently, the BJP too had been playing the role of a "constructive, friendly" Opposition since it found ideological and social affinity with the Congress on many economic issues. But now the BJP sees an opportunity and may no

more be content being the "loyal opposition".

For the Congress and the UPA, the only remedy now is course correction. It has to take the alliance partners more seriously and revive the spirit of the UPA. And oh yes, it has to help restore the credibility of the Man for All Seasons. Through his budgetary exercise, Pranab has tried to paint a scenario of 'short-term pains for long-term gains'. But the experienced warhorse didn't seem to have anticipated the political realignments. The assault from the joint Opposition could leave the government not just in pain; it could even leave the government crippled to reap the long-term gains it set out to do.



Sonia Gandhi



No gain only pain

Why can't politicians tell the truth?

NOW here is something to ponder about. Telangana has been on the boil for over three months now. People are immolating themselves, MPs and MLAs are resigning en masse and the local administration is paralysed. As Telangana flared, noises began to emanate from places as far as Vidharba, Purvanchal, Mithilanchal and Saurashtra for separate states. To douse passions or to buy time, the Centre offered to set up a second States Reorganisation Commission.

Though the issue dominated the front pages, there was strangely no mention of it in President Pratibha Patil's address to Parliament's joint session. Why, she skipped any mention of the appointment of the B.N. Sri Krishna Commission. This is strange because as far back as 2004, the then

Maya claimed she had written to the PM

President APJ Abdul Kalam had made two references to Telangana in his address to Parliament. It appears that the government doesn't quite believe in what it preaches. But the Centre is not the only guilty party. Many regional leaders had demanded smaller states, including Mayawati. She claims to have written a letter to the PM "urging him to give us clearance for creating independent states of Bundelkhand and Harit Pradesh out of a giant sized and unmanageable Uttar Pradesh".

But if what the junior minister for home affairs Ajay Maken told Parliament last week is anything to go by, it is difficult to believe who is telling the truth. He said "as per records available, no political party or leaders have requested for setting up of the second States Reorganisation Commission. However, some representations have been received from individuals/organisations. As of now, no decision has been taken in this respect." All of which just goes to show that our political class doesn't bat an eyelid about fudging the truth.

THERE'S more turbulence awaiting the Congress and things could slip from bad to worse in the coming months. Five senior and "indispensable" ministers of the UPA government, all members of the Rajya Sabha, are due to retire within the next couple of months. The Congress will have to ensure their re-election, which looks easier said than done considering its frosty relations with some of the alliance partners. A.K. Antony, Ambika Soni, Anand Sharma, M.S. Gill and Jairam Ramesh are all high profile ministers as is B.K. Hari Kumar, a general secretary. They are due to retire between April and June.

Among them, Soni and Gill can hope to get elected from Punjab. Sharma will have to

RS re-election jitters for five top ministers in UPA govt

look outside his state because his party is at least 13 seats short to win the lone seat in Himachal.

Antony can take the one seat available for the Congress-led UDF in Kerala, but there is a hitch. The Muslim League, the Congress's local ally in the state, has held a Rajya Sabha seat uninterrupted since 1957. Its MP

A.K. Antony

Abdul Wahab will retire in April along with Antony. As things stand now, Antony is the obvious choice. But Muslim League leaders from Kerala are coming to meet Madam on Tuesday to remind her that the ML has stood by the Congress since 1957, even after the Babri Masjid demolition when everyone else deserted it. The ML argument is that since the Congress can dispatch candidates to other states, Antony should be asked to contest from elsewhere. But sources close to Antony say he will not relish the idea and will opt for ministerial renunciation rather than switch states. Will Madam heed the sentiments of the Muslim League?

Ramesh is from Karnataka but he is a Rajya Sabha member from Andhra Pradesh and considering the sentiments of the Telangana brigade, the party is looking at all options. Last heard, it may even rope Chiranjeevi's Praja Desam Party into the UPA to ensure that the environment minister gets to stay on in the job.

AS things stand now, the Commonwealth Games (CWG) due to be held in New Delhi this October could shame India. Its successful conduct could also be held up as an exemplar of a shining India. For months now, as deadline after deadline passed by and work continued at snail's pace, the odds were on India showing itself up as a sporting pariah to the world. There is some hope now. And it may have come about by default. Girish Chandra Chaturvedi, currently additional secretary financial services, is being appointed as chief executive officer of CWG.

GC as he is affectionately known has completed a seven-year tenure at the Centre and was to have gone back to his parent cadre in Uttar Pradesh. But GC is some sort of a financial wizard, just the kind of chap that Mayawati may not want around. The feelings must have been mutual, because GC is known to have used the immense clout that a close relative enjoys with the powers-that-be to stall his possible transfer back to his home state. By the time the Games are over in October, GC would have been empanelled as secretary to the Government of India. He won't then ever have to serve in Lucknow, Mayawati or no Mayawati.